

Irish Pittsburgh: A Brief History

by Patricia McElligott

In January 2013 my book, *Irish Pittsburgh*, was published by Arcadia Publishing. Using vintage photos, *Irish Pittsburgh* tells the story of immigrants struggling to survive this rough-and-tumble city in the 19th century, and of their children and grandchildren achieving the American Dream in the 20th century. Here is a synopsis of that history.

The first Irish to immigrate in large numbers to North America were 250,000 residents, mostly from Ulster, in the 18th century. Bridling from the tyranny of their British rulers, whose Penal Laws and other oppressive legislation made life difficult for

non-Anglican citizens, Irish Presbyterians and fewer Catholics left Ireland in the hope of finding religious tolerance and economic opportunity in the United States. Periodic famines, rising rents and the decline of the linen trade, a staple of the Irish economy, all drove people to leave. Early immigrants came to Pennsylvania because the colony practiced religious tolerance and offered work to the émigrés. These pioneers—skilled craftsmen, soldiers and even landed gentry—gradually migrated westward and established a trading post in southwestern Pennsylvania, the area that would eventually become Pittsburgh. Until the 1840s, it was predominantly a Protestant history.

For many Irish Pittsburghers, though, the story begins with Ireland's Great Potato Famine of 1845-46. When blight struck the potato crop, the main source of food for Irish farmers, and relief did not arrive, the Irish started dying in the hundreds, then the thousands. In the years and decades that followed people immigrated to Britain, Canada and other countries. By far the largest number of them, 1.5 million, fled to the United States. Once here, after grueling and often deadly voyages, the immigrants settled in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and other cities in such huge numbers that by 1900 there were a half million more Irish in the United States than there were in Ireland.

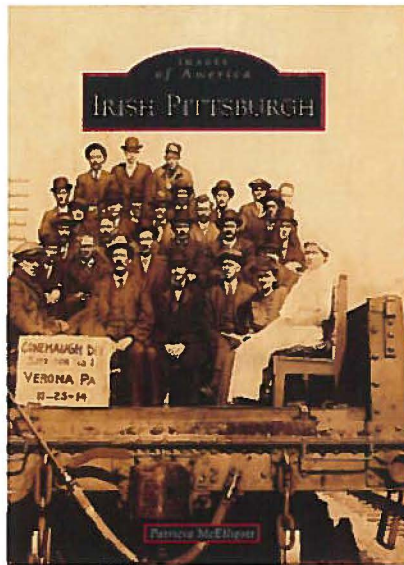
Those who made their way to Pittsburgh found a city booming with industry but unwelcoming to the desperate Irish—except for their willingness to take on backbreaking work. The

immigrants settled in shantytowns and took jobs on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder—as unskilled laborers and domestics—because, no matter how hard the jobs were, they were better than starving. The new arrivals lived in brutal poverty. In *The Valley of Decision*, Marcia Davenport's 1942 novel about the struggles of Irish immigrants in 1873 Pittsburgh, Irish-born maid Mary Rafferty describes her family's North Side shanty, "the cramped and gloomy place that had been her home. She thought about the dirt, the greasy, cindery soot, the miasmic foggy pall that hung over the waterside, the clangor of the freight and ore cars that roared and screeched a stone's throw from her door. She thought about the endless battle with dirt and squalor. . ." (p. 6) Poverty created innumerable social problems. Alcoholism, deadly diseases like cholera and smallpox, mental instability and crime overwhelmed the immigrants and threatened to destroy their American experience. Fortunately, in the years before government provided respite for the needy, the Diocese of Pittsburgh, individual Catholic churches, Sisters of Mercy, Ancient Order of Hibernians and other groups emerged to help the Irish survive.

Stereotypes abound of these early Irish Americans—Paddy the sandhog and Bridget the maid—but the condescension evident in the comical titles underestimates the determination of the Irish to improve their lot. Pittsburgh was not a land of opportunity for 19th century immigrants but it would prove to be just that for their children and grandchildren. These descendants rose from poverty to control City Hall, run the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, found a major football franchise, and excel in the arts, sports and labor unions. Pittsburgh's Irish produced actor-dancer-director Gene Kelly, Steelers' founder Art Rooney, Governor David L. Lawrence, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Charles "Commando" Kelly, singer-activist Anne Feeney, and other groundbreakers who shaped the region and put the Irish imprimatur on the land.

The names of the prominent underscore the fact that, post-Famine, the history of Pittsburgh's Irish is a Catholic history. Kelly, Rooney, Lawrence, Kelly and Feeney were all born and raised Catholic. Until the late 20th century the Church dominated the lives of the Irish in Pittsburgh and across the nation. In his lively history, *The Irish Americans*, Jay P. Dolan writes:

The spiritual center of the Irish neighborhood, be it working-class or middle-class, was the church. The neighborhood was so identified with the parish church that when people were asked where they lived, they would not say the east side or the west side, but St. Patrick's or St. Bridget's; no further description was necessary. The parish complex typically included a large church richly decorated with stained



Book cover of *Irish Pittsburgh*
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Irish Pittsburgh: A Brief History (continued)

glass . . . it stood as a testament to the people's faith. In addition to the church there would be a school, a convent, and a rectory . . . [Churches] were also social and recreation centers where Irish men and women of all ages would gather for festivals, ball games, and dances. Life in the parish and the neighborhood was so encompassing that people seldom left the area. (pp. 95-96)

From these neighborhoods the Irish plotted a future where they and, especially, their children would thrive. Over the decades Irish Americans moved from shantytowns and tenements to solid homes in the city and the suburbs. Every European immigrant group craved home ownership but the Irish wanted it more than most, as if claiming a bit of land could make up for what their ancestors had lost when their farms were taken from them during the Famine years. These Pittsburghers became "lace curtain Irish," the delicate drapery in their windows a sign of their respectability.

Protestant Irish, first known as Ulster Scots, then Scots Presbyterians, founded Pittsburgh but they followed a different



Irish Celebrate During Hard Times: Shirley Griffin O'Brien (center) and friends at Halloween party at Leech Farm Tuberculosis Sanitarium, 1953 or 54

track and are generally considered a separate ethnic group from Irish Catholic. My book dwells on the latter, the Irish who fled famine and post-famine Ireland and their descendants, but a few Irish Protestant families are also included since Pittsburgh is their city too. This collection of vintage documents, mainly photographs, gives the reader an impressionistic, rather than a comprehensive look at life among the Irish in Pittsburgh in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The

first generations of Pittsburghers cultivated a passion for church, politics, Irish independence, and labor unions. Later generations, especially after World War II, identified themselves as Americans and were assimilated into the culture. They held onto some of their heritage, but left behind the Irish neighborhoods, nationalism and other fierce commitments of their ancestors.

The survivors of famine and their progeny have earned a respected place in Pittsburgh's history. These immigrants rose from despised peasants to esteemed citizens—the second largest ethnic group in the city, the state and the country. Irish Pittsburgh honors our ancestors and resurrects their memory by offering highlights from their American experience.

Patricia McElligott, author of the pictorial history, *Irish Pittsburgh*, is a local author and Pittsburgh native.



Pat McElligott with Blanche McGuire, Acting President, CHSWP



Pat McElligott's Lecture at St. Paul Seminary, April 2013

Irish Pittsburgh is available from Arcadia Publishing, www.arcadiapublishing.com, Barnes & Noble Booksellers and the author: patmcell@aol.com.